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Mis/representation of Religion in Religious Education in Transitional Contexts



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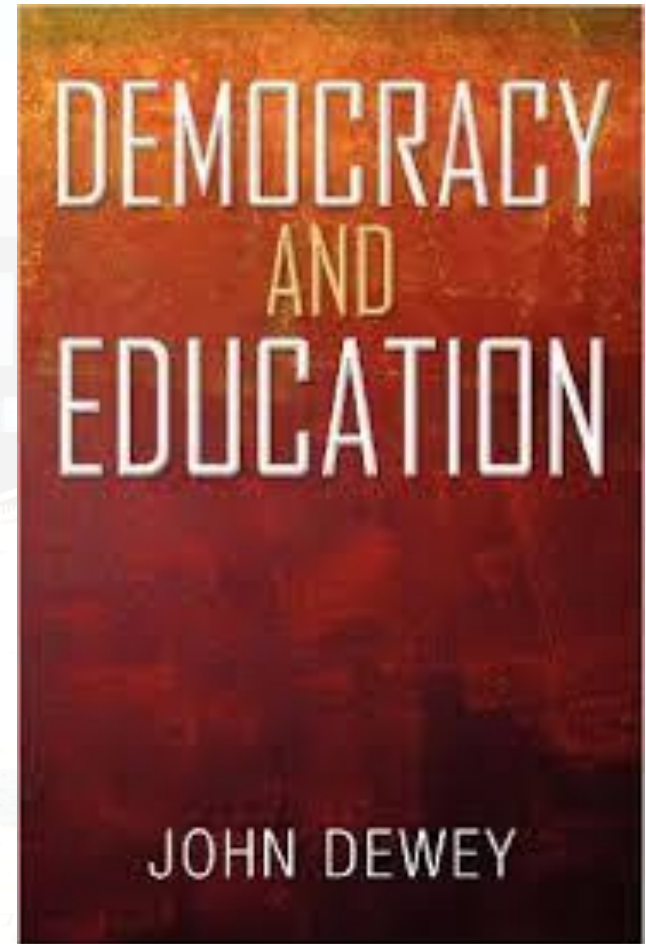
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Introduction

- In *Democracy and Education* (published a century ago), John Dewey considered learning as a process that fosters, nurtures and cultivates prosocial values towards citizenship ([see Dewey 2001](#))
- Applied to RE learning that embraces diversity as an opportunity towards citizenship.
- Mis/represented of religion in RE - an issue that has received little attention in scholarly discourse.
 - Particularly in sub-Saharan Africa where generally RE has not been subjected to much empirical research



Background

- Christian majority in both countries
 - 82.6% Malawi
 - 71.2% Ghana
- Islam biggest minority religion
 - 13% Malawi
 - 17.6% Ghana
- Presence of other religions
- Historically, RE based on a Christian missionary approach (i.e. Bible Knowledge)
- Adopted multi-faith RE in secondary school which follows a phenomenological approach
 - Ghana 1987
 - Malawi 2000

Methodology

- Qualitative study
- Phenomenological approach
- Data collected in Malawi and Ghana
- Data triangulation
 - Face to face in-depth interviews with key stakeholders (n=63)
 - Focus group discussions
 - Document analysis

Table 3. Study participants (interviews)

	Malawi (N = 36)	Ghana (N = 27)
Education officials	3	2
Religious leaders	4	3
Head teachers	9	6
RE lecturers in teacher education	4	6
Representative teacher's union	1	0
Parents	2	2
RE secondary school teachers	13	8

Misrepresentation in the official curriculum

- Multi-faith RE in Malawi and Ghana does not reflect the religious demographic of these countries .
- RE curriculum recognises only three religions and ignores many other s practiced in these countries (compare, [Government of Ghana 2012](#); [Malawi Government 2008](#)).
- In Malawi and Ghana the multi-faith syllabuses select only three religions for study
 - Christianity
 - Islam
 - African Religion
- Selection of religions engenders ignorance of other religions at the door-step.
- Little knowledge gained usually through popular media merely reinforces stereotypes and prejudice against the other religions that are not selected studied ([see Hussain 2012](#)).

Misrepresentation of religion in school textbooks

- Misrepresentation of religions in school textbooks evident.
- In Ghana textbooks comparisons between Jesus (Christianity), Prophet Muhammad (Islam) and Okomfo Anokoye (heroic figure in Ashanti culture) states:

Unlike Jesus who performed many miracles and healing, Mohammed is not known to have performed many ([Baafi 2006, 58](#)).

Concerning healing it has never crossed my ears [in local parlance: 'never heard of it'] that Anokye healed someone of an illness or a disease ([Nwinam 2005, 63, italics supplied](#)).

- In Malawi study - school textbooks suggest the expectation for students to explain how God (Christianity) is *different* from other gods and spirits.
 - Implication - belief that God in Christianity is most superior to others.
 - Comparison is meant to highlight how the other gods and spirits cannot measure up to the Christian God

Teachers' engagement with non-normative religions

- Classroom discourse caused consternation and anger among certain religious groups.
- Some teachers express unsympathetic sentiments against religions they did not consider 'theirs'.

The Muslim community takes offense when 'Christian' teachers use provocative approaches about Islam or say things that are offensive to Muslims and Islam. There are those teachers who use selected Biblical texts to criticize Islam or say insensitive things about our prophet. Since children cannot challenge the teacher they go to their parents and report and then problems start (Malawi Muslim leader 2).

- In Ghana we captured the following in teachers' discourse:

'Kaaba takes human flesh'

'I found the truth in Christianity'

'Join a Christian church'

'We have no excuse to follow traditional religion'

Such discourse maligns non-normative religions and project Christianity as a superior religion

Misrepresentation of the religious 'other'

- Teachers' lack of understanding and familiarity with other religions outside what they consider to be their own.
- Demonisation of the religious 'other' such as Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism, Rastafarianism and others to be undesirable.

I do not accept these other religions as worth teaching in our schools essentially because we Christians desire to convert these people to our religion, and thus it defeats logic on my part to teach a religion I want children to convert from. (Malawi teacher 9)

The Buddhist religion forces people not to eat meat but only vegetables. This is not good. (Malawi Focus Group 1)

God has given us the Bible to follow and since these religions do not follow it, they are satanic religions. (Ghana Focus Group 3)

These religions are not any good religions, they are all about idol worship. (Ghana Focus Group 1)

What Rastafarians do is smoke chamba [marijuana/Indian Hemp]. It will be chaos if government allowed each and every faith practice its faith in such bizarre way. (Malawi Focus Group 2)

- Students also described 'other' religions mostly in negative terms. Referring to African Religion this quotation was captured:

When God was throwing away Lucifer, some of the spirits resided in rocks, trees et cetera so if you worship those, you are not worshiping God. (Ghana Focus Group 4)

Misrepresentation of the nature of religions

- Failure of multi-faith RE to account for intra-religious diversity.
- Presenting a tainted picture of Christianity or Islam with distinct homogeneity.

When we get to those parts [Christian day of worship] it is not easy at all. The students want me to take a position but I try to convince them that all the days are ok if you make it holy. (Ghana Teacher 3)

- Classroom discourse also avoids critical discussion and debate of religious issues, especially of those regarded as “controversial”.

We only teach historical and not doctrinal Islam. In other words we teach only for the students to have basic knowledge of Islam so that they can explain that Muslims do this and that without going into the controversial realm of Islamic doctrine and interpretation. (Malawi teacher 13)

In teaching religion, we don't go into much detail about denominational differences, we only teach the beliefs that are common to all Christians. (Ghana teacher 4)

Conclusion

- Today we live in precarious times when extremist groups have hijacked religion such as Islam, with tragic consequences:
 - ISIS fueled terrorism in Europe
 - Al-Shabbab in Kenya
 - Boko Haram in Nigeria, acutely testify ([Bayim 2015](#); [Svensson 2007](#); [Vittori et al. 2009](#)).
- If religion in the classroom is to fulfill its *educational* objective as a subject of civic value in a multicultural world ([see Gearon 2012](#)), there is need to ensure that RE reinforces democratic values such as tolerance and non-discrimination in a self-reflective way.